

## Increasingly non-partisan, South Africans willing to trade elections for security, housing, jobs

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 248 | Jamy Felton

### Summary

South Africa is getting ready for its fifth general election, expected to be held by August 2019. Over the coming months, political parties will be campaigning for national and provincial leadership.

Over the past year, the three parties that received the most votes in the 2014 election have certainly made headlines. On 14 February 2018, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) had a leadership change when President Jacob Zuma was forced to resign and was replaced by President Cyril Ramaphosa (African National Congress, 2018). A commission of inquiry into state capture by the Gupta family and its allies continues to expose corrupt practices by leaders and their families or friends. Most recently, former Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene resigned after his son's suspected involvement with the Guptas came to light (Grobler, 2018).

The Democratic Alliance (DA), South Africa's biggest opposition party, made many gains in the local government election of 2016 but has been plagued by problems since then. These include a water crisis and leadership battle in Cape Town, the party's most solid metropolitan support base, as well as the unravelling of its winning coalition with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan municipality and evidence of DA internal conflict (Bendile, 2018). Meanwhile the EFF, the breakaway party formed by former ANC Youth League President Julius Malema, has managed to establish itself as an opposition voice of note appealing to the poor, dispossessed, young, and working-class (Southall, 2018; Thambo, 2018).

While these political battles continue, the South African economy has officially entered a recession, making life harder for the average citizen (CNBC, 2018; Van Zyl, 2018). Almost daily protests over service delivery -- 144 in all -- were recorded in the first half of 2018, clear evidence of popular dissatisfaction with the government's ability to deliver (Makhafola, 2018).

Election campaigns are sure to make the most of these issues, but will South Africans be listening? The latest Afrobarometer survey findings show that while the ANC retains a commanding lead among declared voters, a large and growing proportion of South Africans do not identify with any political party and may be up for grabs in the election. Popular dissatisfaction with government service delivery is high -- to the point that a majority of citizens would be willing to give up elections altogether in exchange for security, housing, and jobs. These findings suggest that political parties may do well to focus their campaigns on showing how they plan to give South Africans a tangible reason to vote for them.

### Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African

countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

## Key findings

- In a hypothetical election tomorrow, almost half (48%) of South Africans say they would vote for the ANC. The DA and EFF would tie for distant second with 11% each, while more than one-fourth (27%) of citizens don't know or won't say how they would vote, or wouldn't vote.
- More than half (53%) of South Africans say they do not feel close to any political party – the largest proportion of “non-partisans” since 2000. A majority of non-partisans live in urban areas, are under the age of 35, and have a secondary or post-secondary education.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens say the 2014 election was free and fair, yet only about half as many (38%) say they trust the Independent Electoral Commission “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- Six in 10 South Africans (62%) say they would be willing to forgo elections if a non-elected government could provide law and order, housing, and jobs.

## ANC leads while opposition race tightens

With the election less than a year away, the ANC will be looking to extend its winning streak dating back to 1994, while the DA and EFF (which won 22% and 6% of the vote, respectively, in 2014) will seek to strengthen their positions as legitimate opposition forces (Independent Electoral Commission, 2018).

According to the latest Afrobarometer data, almost half (48%) of South Africans say that if elections were held tomorrow, they would vote for the ANC. The DA and EFF would tie for second place with 11% each. All other parties would combine for 4% of votes, while more than a quarter (27%) of South Africans say they don't know whom they would vote for, they would not vote, or they refused to answer the question (Figure 1).

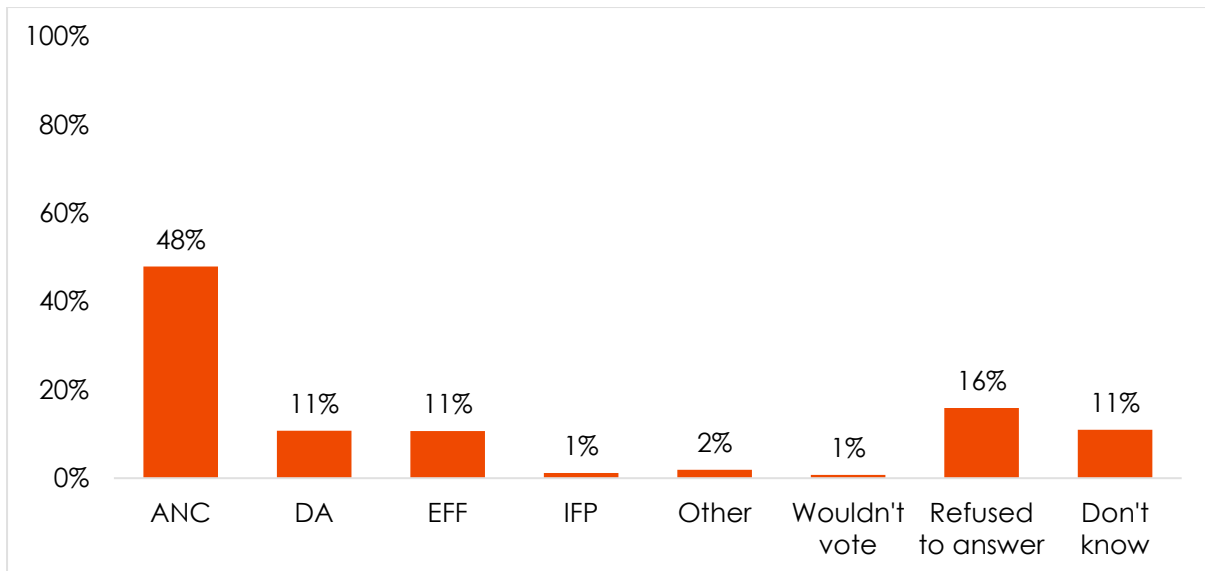
The ANC's 48% is the same proportion it received in Afrobarometer's 2015 survey, down from 55% in 2011 (Figure 2). After a decade of growth on this indicator, the DA lost ground compared to 2015 (17%), while the relatively young EFF has managed to pull even with the DA as the largest opposition parties in South Africa.

The ANC is considerably stronger in rural areas (59%) than cities (43%). The DA, in contrast, triples its rural share (4%) in urban areas (14%), while the EFF shows urban-rural balance (11% each) (Figure 3).

Men and women express similar voting preferences except for an EFF weakness among women (8%). By age group, the ANC shows its weakest support among younger citizens (43% of 18- to 25-year-olds). The EFF, on the other hand, is stronger among younger respondents (17% of 18- to 25-year-olds) than their elders.

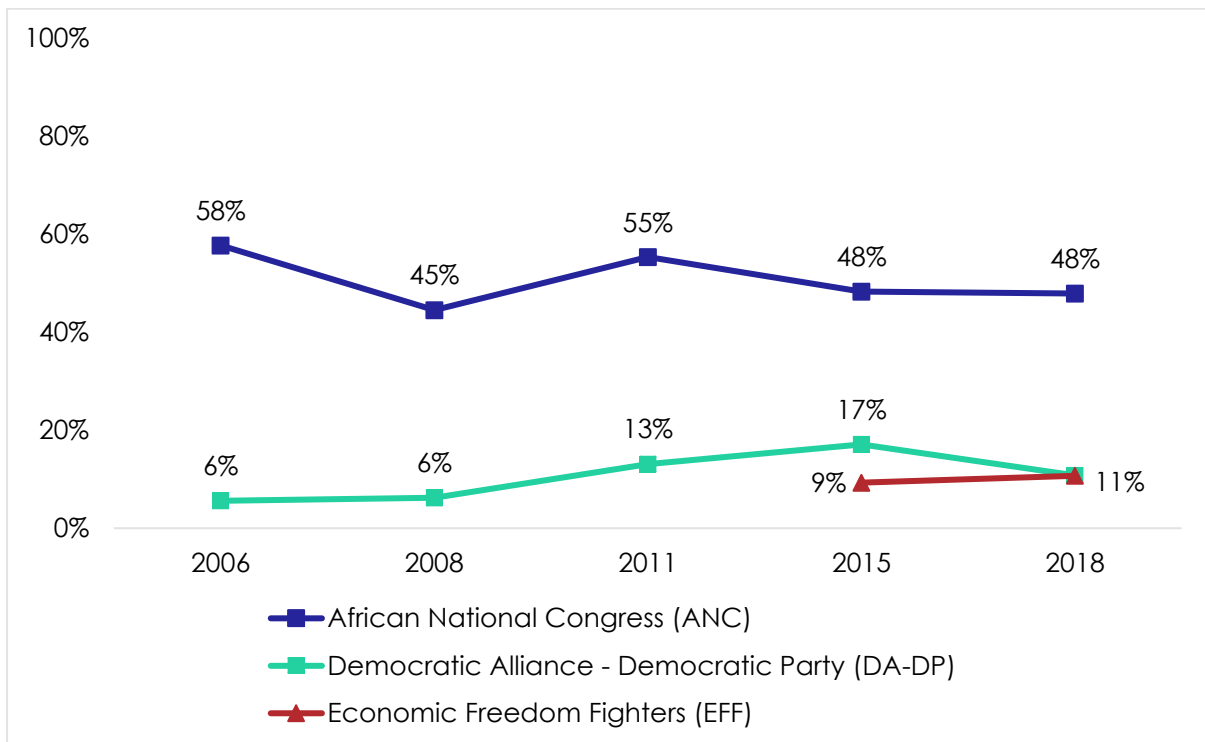
The only province where the ANC does not have the largest share of support among these declared voters is Western Cape, where it trails the DA 31% to 23%. The ANC enjoys majority support in the Eastern Cape (69%), Mpumalanga (65%), Limpopo (60%), and North West (55%) provinces. More than one-third of respondents are in the “don’t know/refused to answer/wouldn’t vote” camp in Western Cape (39%) and KwaZulu-Natal (34%).

**Figure 1: Voting intentions** | South Africa | 2018



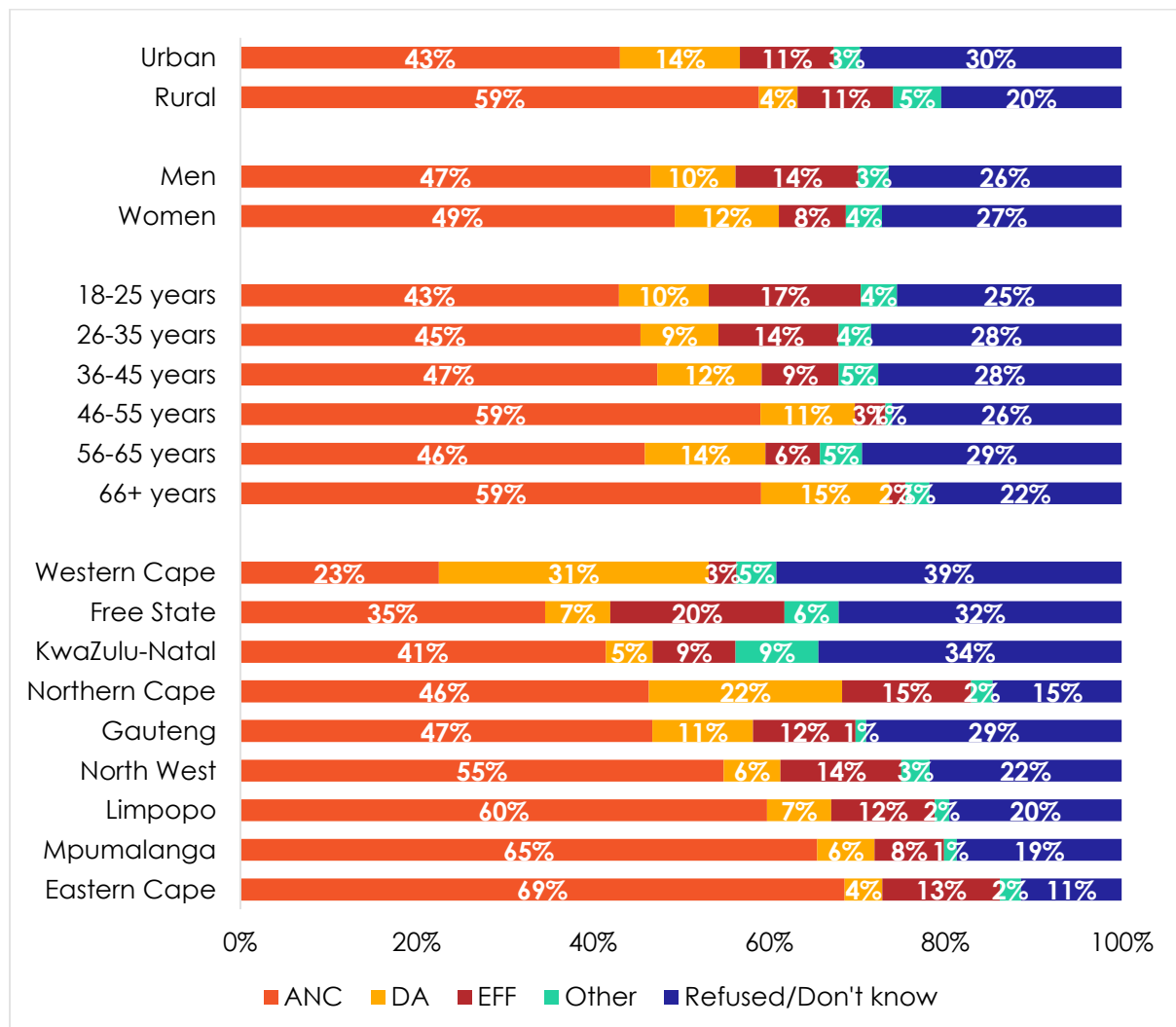
**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?*

**Figure 2: Trends in voting intentions** | South Africa | 2006-2018



**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?*

**Figure 3: Voting intentions** | by demographic group | South Africa | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?*

### What the voter base looks like

While an analysis of voting intentions by demographic group gives us an idea of how different people might vote, it may be useful for parties to know what their current vote base looks like. This might help them identify potential target audiences and focus areas for their campaigns. Recalling the caveat that 27% of survey respondents did not reveal a voting intention, we see that the DA has the most heavily urbanized voter base: 87% of avowed DA supporters live in cities, compared to 68% of ANC and 62% of EFF supporters (Figure 4).

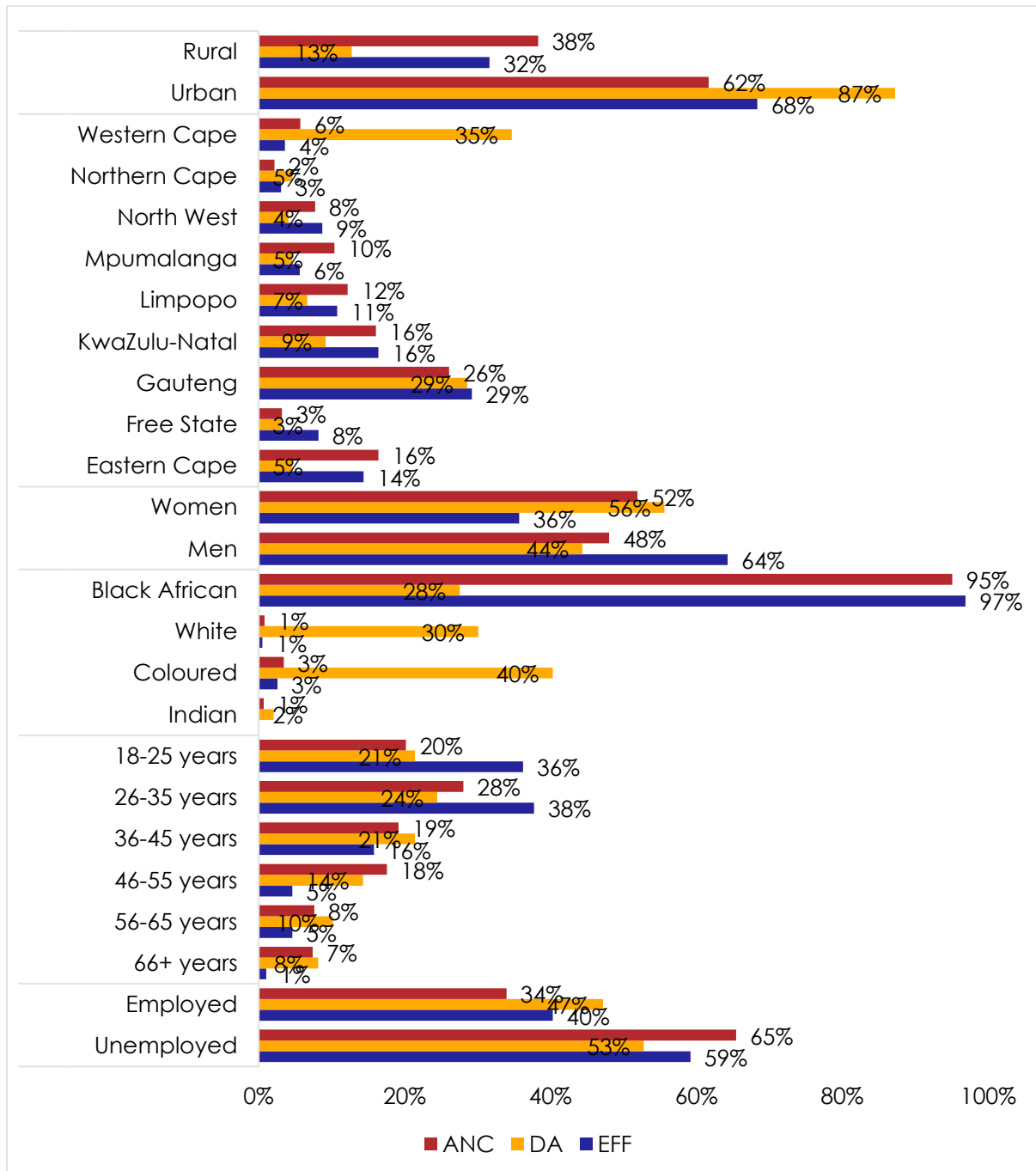
Based on respondents' stated voting intentions, each of the three parties draws more than one-fourth of its voters from Gauteng province, making it an important battleground for all three. The DA's largest voter base is in the Western Cape province (35%), the only DA-governed province, while ANC and EFF support is spread more evenly across most other provinces. Gauteng and the Western Cape account for more than one-third (36%) of the country's population (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

While the ANC and DA voter bases lean toward being majority female (52% and 56%, respectively), the EFF voter base is almost two-thirds male (64%). Nine in 10 people who say they would vote for the ANC or EFF are Black African South Africans, while more than two-

thirds of the DA support base is Coloured (40%) or White (30%). While all three parties have more young voters than older voters, the EFF voter base is most heavily reliant on younger supporters: Three-quarters are between the ages of 18 and 35, compared to slightly less than half for the ANC and DA.

More than half of declared voters for all three parties are unemployed – up to 65% of those who say they would vote for the ANC.

**Figure 4: Demographic characteristics of parties' voter base | South Africa | 2018**



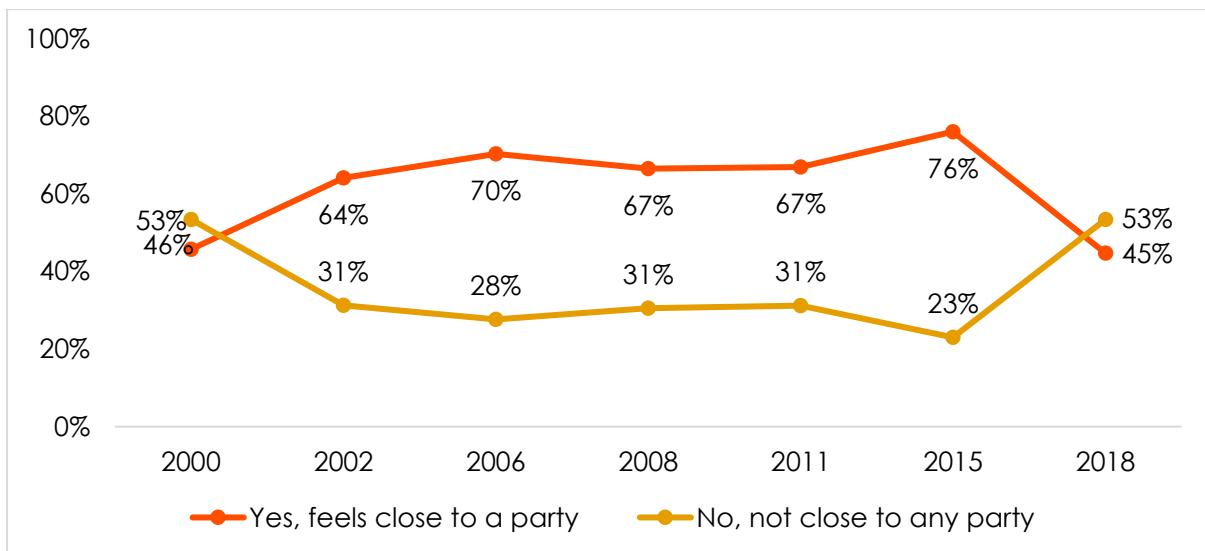
**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for? (Figure shows proportion of each party's supporters who fall into each socio-demographic category. Respondents who did not disclose a voting intention are excluded.)*

### The non-partisan voter

Even though 73% of survey respondents are willing to state which party they would vote for if the election were held tomorrow, not nearly as many identify as partisans of a political party. When asked whether they feel close to a particular political party, more than half (53%) of South Africans say they do not – the first time since Afrobarometer’s 2000 survey that non-partisans outnumber partisans. It reflects a sharp reversal from 2015, in which fully three-fourths (76%) of respondents said they felt close to a party (Figure 5).

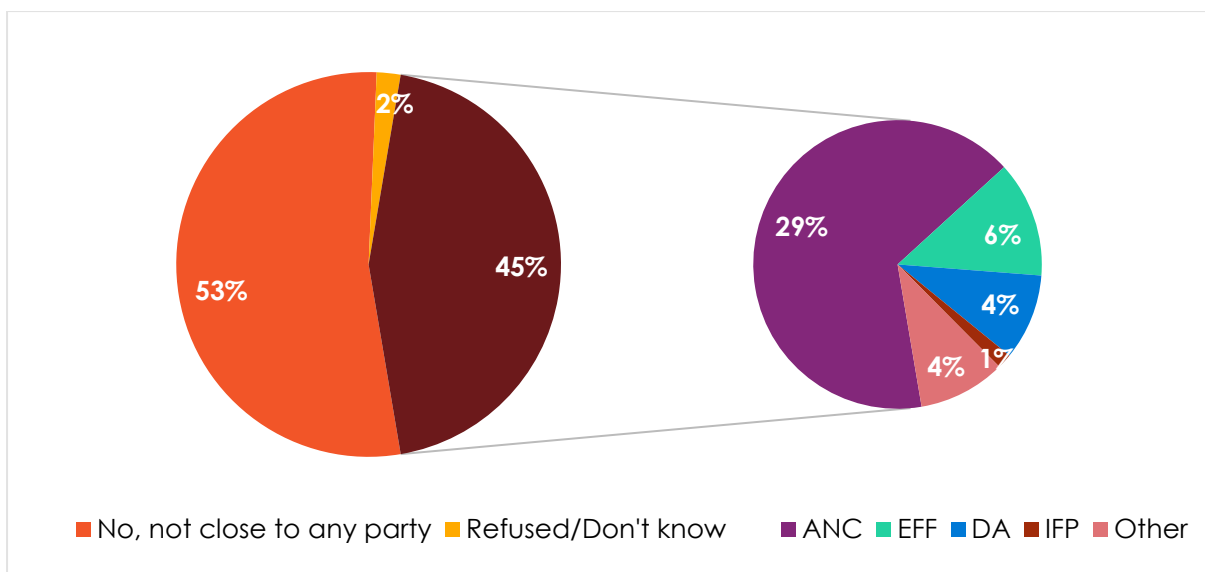
In 2018, 29% of all survey respondents say they feel close to the ANC – by far the largest proportion among those who identify with any political party (Figure 6). Just 6% say they feel close to the EFF, and 4% to the DA.

**Figure 5: Levels of partisanship | South Africa | 2000-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel close to any particular political party?

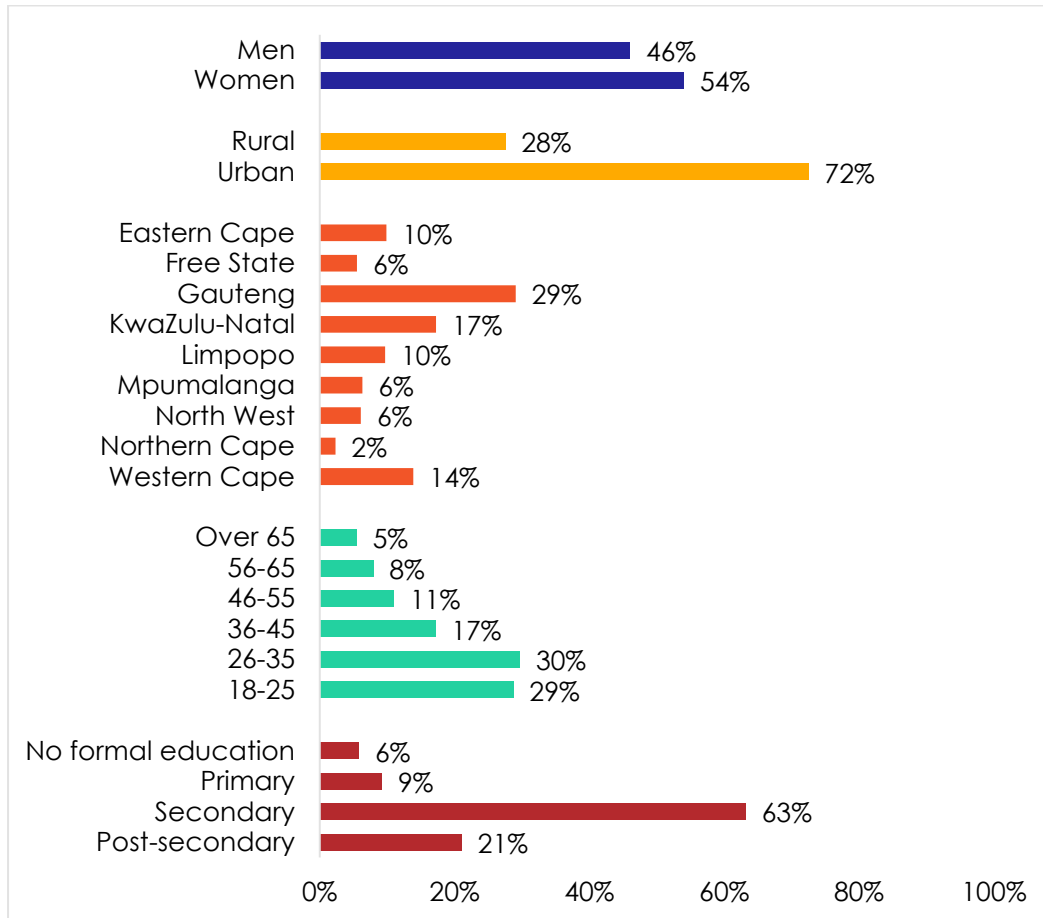
**Figure 6: Party identification | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?

Looking at the demographic characteristics of these non-partisans (Figure 7), we see that almost three-quarters (72%) reside in urban areas. Three out of 10 (29%) live in the Gauteng. Given that Gauteng is the most “shared” province support base of the three largest parties, this may suggest that parties would do well to focus their campaign efforts in Gauteng in a bid to win these non-partisan voters. The data also indicate that more than half of these respondents are below the age of 35. And they are educated: Four-fifths of them have either a secondary or post-secondary qualification.

**Figure 7: Demographic characteristics of non-partisans | South Africa | 2018**

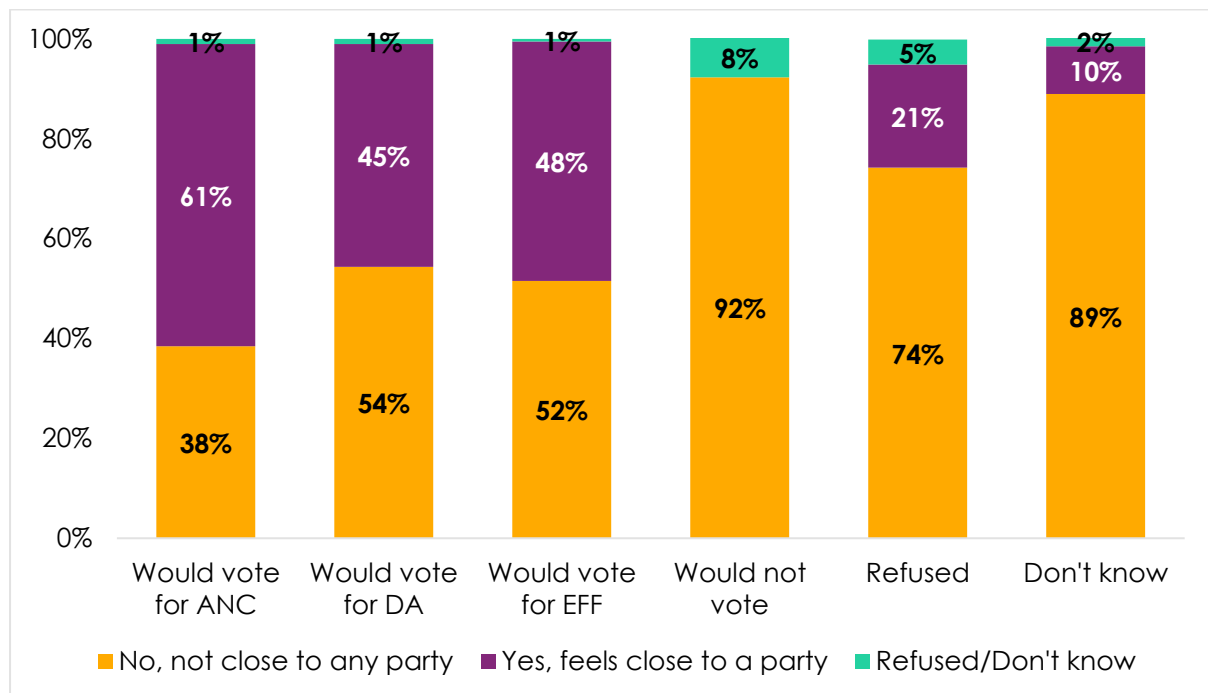


**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel close to any particular political party? (% who say “no”)  
 (Figure shows proportion of “non-partisans” who fall into each socio-demographic category.)

When we analyze declared voting intentions by whether respondents feel close to a party, the numbers indicate that half of hypothetical DA and EFF “voters” do not feel close to any party (54% and 52%, respectively) (Figure 8). The same is true of 38% of ANC “voters.” Understandably, most “don’t know/refused to answer/wouldn’t vote” respondents also say they do not feel close to any party.

Furthermore, 26% of South Africans say both that they voted in the 2014 election and that they do not feel close to any political party. Even though over-reporting of voting is common, the substantial percentage of people who say they voted and do not feel close to any party suggests that there is a significant proportion of the population who may be open to influence by party campaigns and/or policy. This supports arguments that “political performance matters and electoral campaigns matter” (Mattes, Taylor, & Africa, 1999). These may be people who will be making their voting decisions closer to the election.

**Figure 8: Do South Africans feel close to parties they plan to vote for? | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:**

- If national elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?
- Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?

**Attitudes toward elections**

Given its large proportion of non-partisans, will South Africans be motivated enough to go out and vote? If attitudes toward elections impact democratic participation, the latest Afrobarometer findings offer a mixed outlook: While South Africans express a general preference for elections, their willingness to forgo them in exchange for personal security is high.

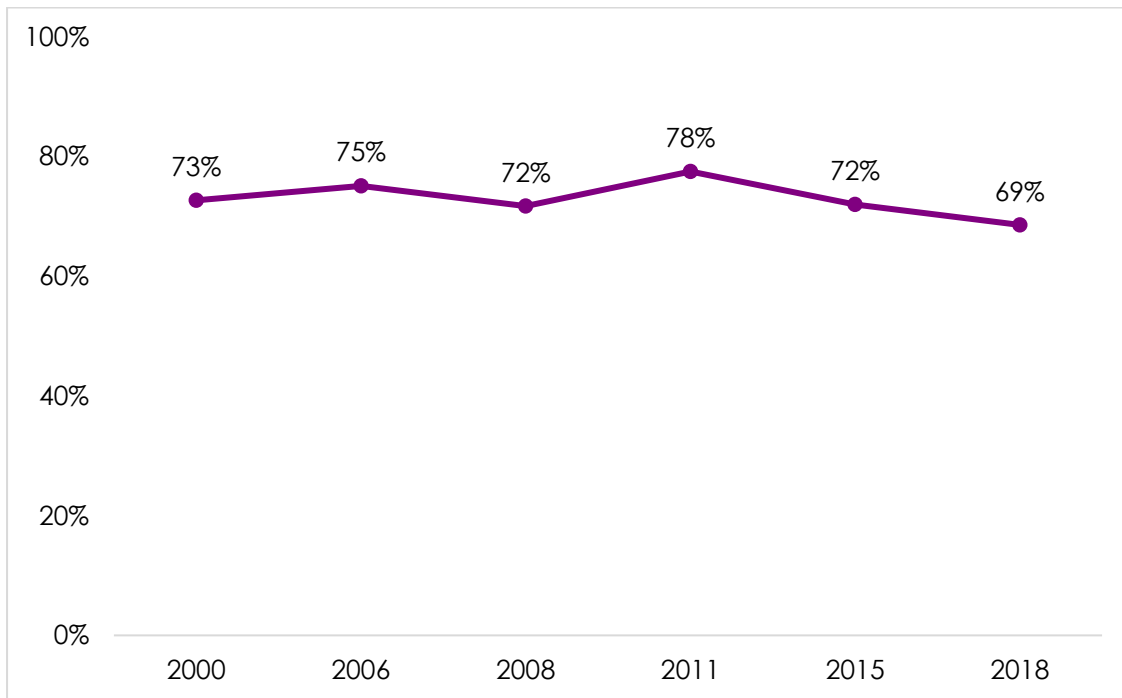
Over the past two decades, most South Africans have characterized their national elections as largely free and fair. In 2018, 69% say the 2014 election was "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems," the lowest proportion of positive responses since 2000 (Figure 9).

Strikingly, popular trust in the Independent Electoral Commission has dropped dramatically. Fewer than four in 10 South Africans (38%) say they trust the IEC "somewhat" or "a lot," a 31-percentage-point decline since 2011 (Figure 10). One contributing factor to this decline in trust may be allegations of partiality following the 2016 local government election. After suffering significant losses in some metropolitan municipalities, the ANC accused the IEC of leaking results to the opposition and accused its deputy chairperson of being an "enemy" of the party (News24, 2016; Nicolson, 2018).

Despite these declines in popular belief in electoral institutions, a majority – though hardly an overwhelming majority – of South Africans express faith in the current electoral system. At least six in 10 favour regular, open, and honest elections as the best way to choose leaders (61%), support multiparty competition (60%), and reject one-party rule (62%) and one-man rule (69%) (Figure 11).

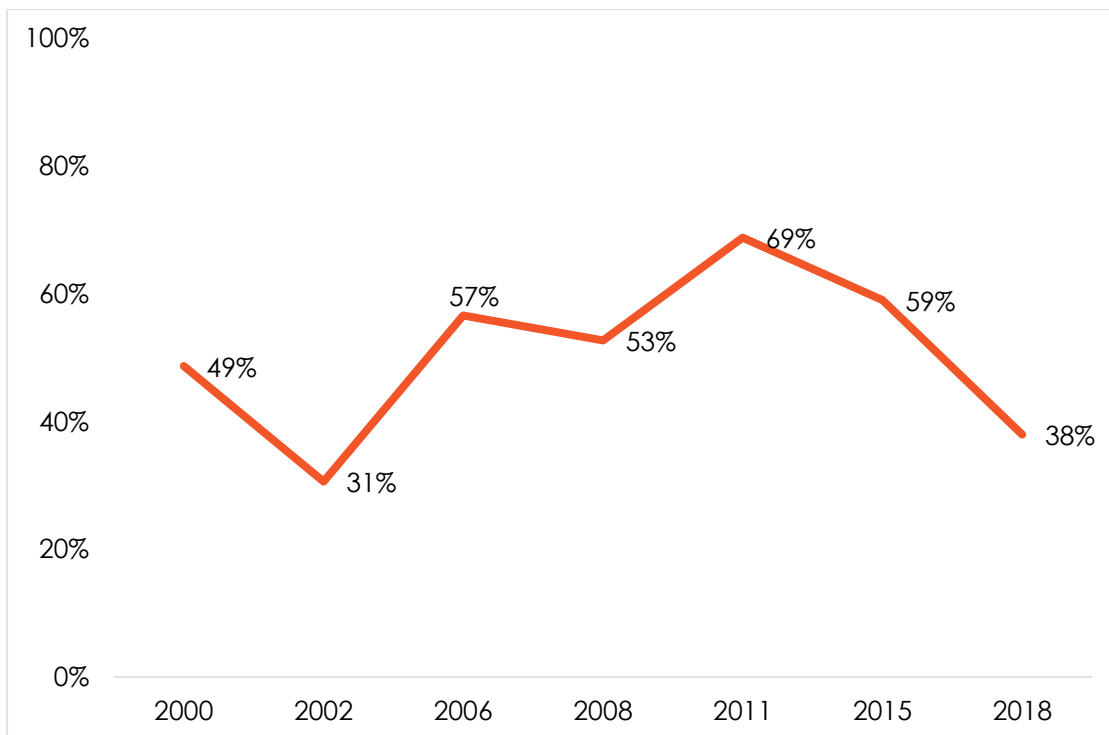


**Figure 9: Last election was free and fair** | South Africa | 2000-2018



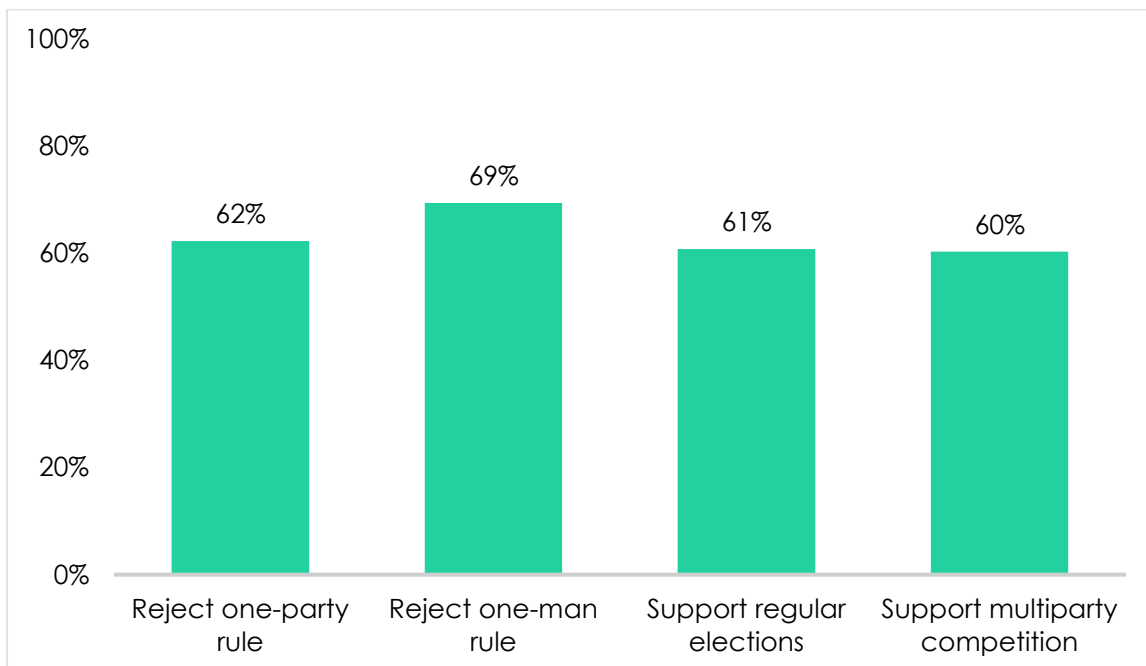
**Respondents were asked:** On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2014? (% who say "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems")

**Figure 10: Trust in the Independent Electoral Commission** | South Africa | 2000-2018



**Respondents were asked.** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Independent Electoral Commission? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

**Figure 11: Support for current electoral system | South Africa | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:**

- There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives:
  - o Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?
  - o Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything?

(% who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove")

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.  
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in South Africa.

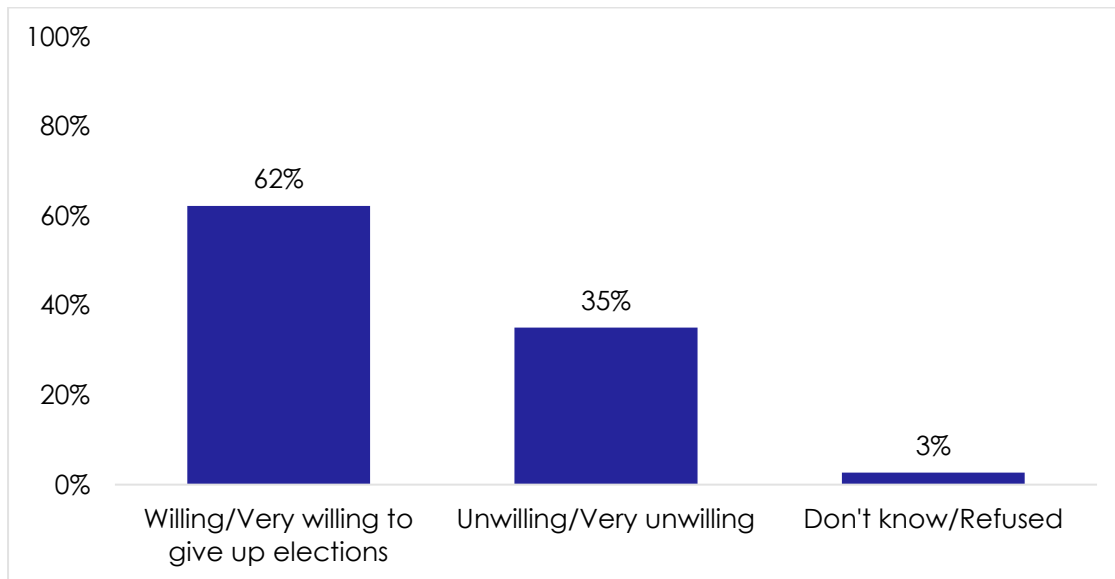
Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that South African have real choices in who governs them.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree with Statement 2)

Despite a preference for elections, the data show that a majority of South Africans would be open to giving up elections in return for good service delivery by the government. More than six in 10 (62%) say they would be "willing" or "very willing" to forgo elections if a non-elected government or leader were able to impose law and order and provide housing and jobs (Figure 12).

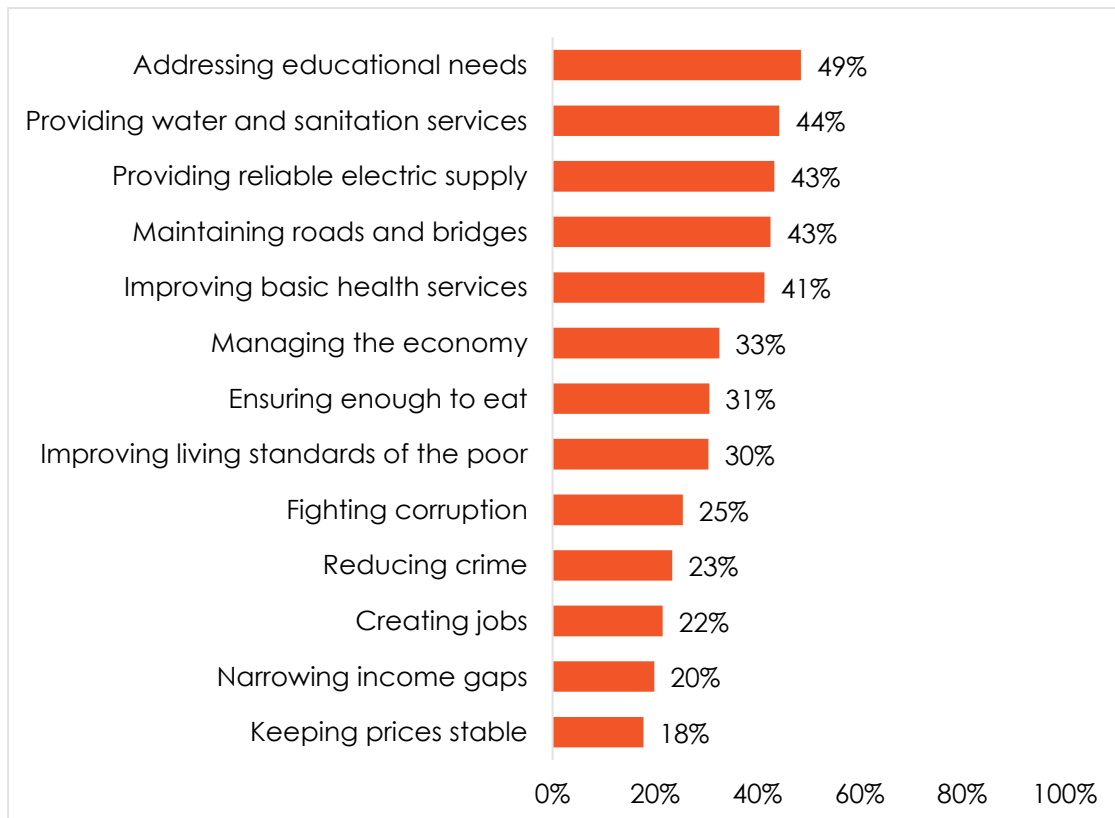
This finding may suggest the depth of South Africans' dissatisfaction with the government's performance. Only one-fifth (22%) of citizens say the government is performing "fairly well" or "very well" at providing jobs, and fewer than one-third (30%) are satisfied with government's efforts to improve living standards of the poor (Figure 13).

**Figure 12: Willing to give up elections in exchange for security, housing, and jobs**  
 | South Africa | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** *If a non-elected government or leader could impose law and order, and deliver houses, and jobs: How willing or unwilling would you be to give up regular elections and live under such a government?*

**Figure 13: Government ability to deliver** | South Africa | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")*

## Conclusion

Among South Africans willing to say how they'd vote in a hypothetical election, the EFF has pulled even with the DA, but both remain far behind the ANC. Beyond the horse race, however, the latest Afrobarometer findings suggest a population that is increasingly uncommitted to a particular party and perhaps so disillusioned with government service delivery as to question the value of democracy.

A majority of South Africans do not feel close to any party, the highest level of non-partisanship since 2000. Even if many of these "non-partisans" are willing to state a voting intention, they may be open to new information from election campaigns and policy action.

A majority also see the government as failing to provide essential public services, to the point where six in 10 South Africans would be willing to do away with elections altogether if they could get a non-elected government or leader who could provide them with law and order, housing, and jobs.

Political parties might do well to focus their campaigns on citizens who are not yet committed to a particular party – most prominently people who are educated, youth, and urban residents – and on plans for providing the services they expect.

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**Jamy Felton** is the Afrobarometer data quality officer and a researcher at the Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa, at the University of Cape Town. Email: [jfelton@afrobarometer.org](mailto:jfelton@afrobarometer.org)

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